

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Marcellus I

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: January 16

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IN BRIEF

Saint Marcellus I

Pope from 308 to 309, who reorganized the Church of Rome after the persecution of Diocletian and died in exile.

Feast day	January 16
Died	309
Era	4th century
Patron saint of	grooms, stable workers, grain merchants

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Marcellus I for Those Who Rebuild

Novena to Saint Marcellus I

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Marcellus I

Saint Marcellus I was bishop of Rome from 308 to 309, just after the harshest persecution the Christians of the Roman Empire had ever known. Elected after a long vacancy of the see, he set about rebuilding a Church in disarray, but his firmness toward those who had denied their faith provoked riots, and the emperor Maxentius sent him into exile. He died soon afterward. The Roman Martyrology commemorates him on January 16.

Who was Saint Marcellus I?

Nothing certain is known of his origins. He enters history at the moment when the Church of Rome was emerging from the persecution of Diocletian. Bishop Marcellinus had died in 304, and for nearly four years no successor could be consecrated. Marcellus, then a priest, seems to have played an important role during this period.

According to an ancient list of the popes, the *Liberian Catalogue*, he took office in 308; a common interpretation sets his consecration on May 27 of that year. His time as bishop was short, but it came at a decisive moment.

Key dates in the life of Saint Marcellus I

- **303-304**: Persecution of Diocletian in Rome; death of Pope Marcellinus.
- **306**: Maxentius takes power in Rome; Christians enjoy a relative peace.
- **May 27, 308**: The date generally accepted for the beginning of his episcopate.
- **Late 308 or early 309**: Exiled from Rome by order of Maxentius.
- **309**: Dies in exile, in an unknown place.

- **January 16**: The day of his memorial, already listed in the Roman calendar of 354.

Rebuilding a wounded Church

The persecution launched under Diocletian in 303 was the last great persecution of the Roman Empire and one of the most violent. Churches were destroyed, sacred books were burned, and Christians were ordered to sacrifice to the gods on pain of imprisonment, torture or death. In Rome, the coming to power of Maxentius in 306 brought a relative calm, but the community remained deeply shaken.

When Marcellus took office, the situation was difficult. Meeting places and cemeteries had been confiscated, and the ordinary life of the community had been interrupted for years. Many faithful had died, others had fled or given in.

According to the *Liber Pontificalis*, he organized Rome into twenty-five districts, the *tituli*, each entrusted to a priest responsible for preparing catechumens for baptism, overseeing penance and caring for the tombs of the martyrs. The figure may reflect a later period, but historians agree that he did reorganize the Roman Church after the persecution. He also had a new cemetery laid out on the Via Salaria.

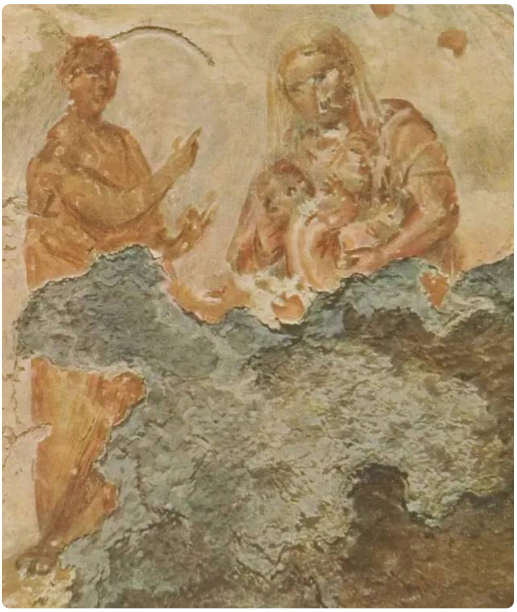
The *tituli* are the distant ancestors of the parishes of Rome. In a sense, Marcellus helped give the Church of Rome the shape that would allow it to welcome the great growth that came with the peace of Constantine a few years later.

The conflict over the lapsed

The most serious difficulty came from the *lapsi*, those who had denied their faith during the persecution. Many wanted to return without doing penance. Marcellus, faithful to the ancient discipline, required true penance.

The inscription later composed for his tomb by Pope Damasus presents him as an adversary feared by sinners, because he asked them to weep for their fault. A party formed against him, and the quarrels turned violent. Maxentius held the bishop responsible for the unrest and banished him. Marcellus died soon afterward, and his body was buried in the Catacomb of Priscilla.

His successor, Saint Eusebius, would face the same crisis and also end his days in exile.



The Catacomb of Priscilla, on the Via Salaria, where Marcellus was first buried.

History and legend

A later *Passion of Marcellus* tells a different ending. The emperor is said to have condemned him to tend animals in a stable of the imperial post, set up in the house of a Christian woman named Lucina, where he died. This account is considered legendary.

Tradition holds that the church of San Marcello al Corso was built on the site of that house. His relics rest beneath its high altar, in an ancient basalt urn.

Why is Saint Marcellus I the patron saint of grooms and stable workers?

His patronage comes from the legend of the stable. Because, according to the *Passion*, he was forced to care for the animals of the imperial post until his death, Saint Marcellus was honored as patron of grooms and stable hands, those who look after horses. He is also counted among the patrons of grain merchants.

Beyond these traditional patronages, his life invites us to pray for those who must rebuild after a crisis: pastors of wounded communities, families after a breakup, organizations after a scandal.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Marcellus I in art

Few images of Saint Marcellus I exist. Like the other early popes, he is usually shown in papal vestments, as in the old portraits that illustrate the series of the popes. When an artist wishes to recall his story, the legend of the stable and his care for the animals of the imperial post is the most distinctive element.

What can we learn from his holiness?

Marcellus served the Church at a moment when everything had to be rebuilt. He wanted forgiveness to be taken seriously and the community to recover a solid organization, at the risk of unpopularity and exile. His firmness and the mercy of his successor are two sides of the same love for a wounded Church.

Where to pray to Saint Marcellus I

- **Rome**: the church of San Marcello al Corso, where his relics are kept beneath the high altar.
- **Rome**: the Catacomb of Priscilla, on the Via Salaria, his first burial place.

To pray with him, use the prayer to Saint Marcellus I or the novena to Saint Marcellus I.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Marcellus I for Those Who Rebuild

There is no widely known traditional prayer to Saint Marcellus I, the pope who rebuilt the Church of Rome after the persecution of Diocletian and died in exile. Below you will find an original prayer by Saintspedia, inspired by his life, for all who must rebuild after a crisis, and a short invocation for those who care for animals.

A pope who asked for true repentance

The epitaph composed by Pope Damasus for his tomb presents Marcellus as a pastor feared by sinners, because he asked them to weep for their faults. His firmness was not harshness: he believed that forgiveness is serious, and that true repentance heals both the sinner and the community.

Prayer to Saint Marcellus I

Saint Marcellus, bishop of Rome after the storm of persecution, you gathered a scattered Church and gave it a solid structure again: pray for all who must rebuild after a crisis.

You entrusted each district of Rome to a priest to prepare the baptized, guide penitents and honor the martyrs: pray for our parishes, our priests and our catechists.

You asked for true repentance from those who had fallen: help me to take my sins seriously and to receive God's forgiveness with a sincere heart.

You accepted exile rather than betray your conscience: give me the courage to remain faithful when faithfulness costs me something. I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Obtain for the Church unity and peace, and for each of us a humble and converted heart. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia. It is free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Marcellus I is commemorated on January 16. This prayer is also fitting:

- for a parish, a community or a family that is rebuilding after a trial;
- before the Sacrament of Reconciliation;
- for priests and catechists who prepare people for baptism;
- when you must make an unpopular decision out of faithfulness to your conscience.

A short invocation for those who care for animals

According to a legend, Marcellus was condemned to tend the animals of a stable, which is why he is honored as patron of grooms and stable workers.

> *Saint Marcellus, you served humbly among the animals of a stable: bless those who care for horses and animals, give them patience and gentleness, and keep them safe in their work. Amen.*

This invocation is also an original text by Saintspedia.

To pray with him over nine days, follow the novena to Saint Marcellus I. To know him better, read the life of Saint Marcellus I.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Marcellus I

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Pope Saint Marcellus I, who rebuilt the Church of Rome after the persecution of Diocletian and died in exile. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on the eve of his memorial on January 16, begin on January 7; it ends on January 15. It is especially suited to praying for a community, a family or a person who must rebuild after a crisis.

How to pray this novena

Each day, entrust your intention to God, read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The suggested act helps you carry the prayer into your day. Little is known of Marcellus with certainty: the meditations draw on what history tells us, and on the legend of his last days where it is presented as such. If you miss a day, simply continue where you left off. This novena can be prayed alone, but it is also well suited to a parish council, a group of catechists or a family that wants to entrust a new beginning to God together.

Day 1: After the storm

When Marcellus became bishop, the Church of Rome had just survived the persecution of Diocletian. For nearly four years there had been no bishop. Everything had to be rebuilt.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, pray for all who are trying to rebuild their lives after a disaster, an illness or a breakup. Give them hope. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone who is starting over after a hard trial.

Day 2: Faithful in the waiting

During the long vacancy of the see, Marcellus, then a priest, seems to have played an important role. He served faithfully before he was given authority. The Church survived those years thanks to people like him, who kept the community together without title or recognition.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, teach me to serve faithfully where I am, without seeking recognition. Amen.

Today: Do a hidden service for someone without telling anyone.

Day 3: Giving the Church a structure

Marcellus organized Rome into districts, the *tituli*, each entrusted to a priest. The Church needs not only zeal but also order, so that each person can be cared for.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, pray for our parishes and for those who serve in them, that each member of the faithful may be known and accompanied. Amen.

Today: Offer your help to your parish in a concrete way.

Day 4: Preparing for baptism

The priests of the *tituli* were to prepare catechumens for baptism. Handing on the faith was at the heart of the Church's rebirth.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, bless catechists and all who are preparing for baptism or confirmation. Amen.

Today: Thank God for your baptism, and pray for those who will be baptized this year.

Day 5: Honoring the martyrs

Marcellus wanted the tombs of the martyrs to be cared for, and he had a new cemetery laid out on the Via Salaria. The Church does not forget those who gave their lives for Christ.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, help me to honor the memory of those who went before us in faith, and to pray for the dead. Amen.

Today: Pray for your deceased loved ones, or visit a cemetery.

Day 6: True repentance

Marcellus asked those who had denied their faith to do real penance. For him, forgiveness was not a formality but a conversion of the heart.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, give me a sincere sorrow for my sins and a deep trust in God's forgiveness. Amen.

Today: Make an examination of conscience and, if possible, go to confession.

Day 7: Unpopular for the truth

His firmness made him enemies. A party formed against him and the quarrels turned violent. He did not abandon what he believed was right.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, give me the courage to remain faithful to my conscience, even when it makes me unpopular, and to do so without bitterness. Amen.

Today: Stand up for what is right in a situation where it would be easier to stay silent.

Day 8: Exile

Maxentius held Marcellus responsible for the unrest and banished him. He died soon after, far from his Church. Even in exile, he remained its shepherd through his prayer and his faithfulness.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, pray for exiles, migrants and all who are far from home. Help me to remain faithful when I feel alone. Amen.

Today: Pray for refugees, or welcome someone who is new in your area.

Day 9: Humble service

According to a later legend, Marcellus spent his last days tending animals in a stable. Whether history or legend, the image speaks of humble service accepted for love of God.

Prayer: Saint Marcellus, teach me humility in service, and bless all who care for animals and for the land. Amen.

Today: Accept a humble task with a good heart.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you gave Saint Marcellus the strength to rebuild your Church after persecution and to call sinners to true repentance. Through his intercession, help us to rebuild what has been broken in our lives and communities, to receive your forgiveness with sincere hearts, and to remain faithful in every trial. Hear the intention I have entrusted to you during this novena. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

To continue praying with him, use the prayer to Saint Marcellus I, or read the life of Saint Marcellus I.

Credits and sources

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